

MIDDLE GRADES...ON THE MOVE! **SUPPORTING THE SUCCESS OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS**

**New Jersey Department of Education
Office of Improvement and Innovation**

Available online at <http://www.nj.gov/education/dsis/newsletter/>

Volume II
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Spring 2009
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Welcome to **Middle Grades...On the Move!** So much is happening in the world of middle-level education. Young adolescents have special needs and so do the adults who work with them—so join us by reading and sharing **Middle Grades...On the Move!**

A Voice from the Middle **Excerpts from the NASSP/PDK Middle School Student Poll**

In February 2007, more than 1800 middle school students across the nation participated in a carefully designed online research panel that asked them what they thought about their schools, teachers, fellow students, and their plans for the future. Here are some highlights from this revealing survey:

- Ninety-two percent of the students surveyed indicated they would definitely or probably attend college.
- Ninety-three percent said there was no chance they would drop out of high school.
- Forty percent of the middle school kids who indicated they might drop out of high school said that low grades or their inability to keep up with coursework would be the primary reason.
- Fifty-eight percent of the students said they knew only “a little” about what is required of them in high school but 25 percent said they didn’t know “anything” about required high school courses or classes.

For more details on the survey, please go to http://www.pdkintl.org/ms_poll/ms_poll.htm.

New Jersey Schools to Watch (NJSTW)[®]

Growing, Learning and Succeeding!

2008-2009 Designated Schools

The New Jersey Schools to Watch[®]: Growing, Learning and Succeeding program recognizes middle-grades schools that focus on academic rigor for all, developmentally-appropriate practices, and social equity supported by strong leadership, policies, and practices that lead to improved student achievement. Any school with grades 6, 7, and/or 8 is eligible to apply for designation. The New Jersey Department of Education is pleased to announce the 2008-2009 New Jersey Schools to Watch:

- Dwight D. Eisenhower Middle School, Berlin Township, Camden County
- Holland Township School, Holland Township, Hunterdon County
- Medford Memorial Middle School, Medford Township, Burlington County
- Roosevelt Middle School, West Orange, Essex County

These schools participated in a rigorous process that began with the administrative team's reviewing a checklist of 12 important criteria. The entire school participated in a self-assessment process and completed a narrative addressing student achievement, access to rigorous courses for all, and student behavior. After careful screening, ten schools were visited and four designated. The remaining six schools become an "Aspiring School to Watch,"- a new category added this year to acknowledge schools that met many of the criteria but still need time to refine and institutionalize certain practices and programs.

The New Jersey Schools to Watch-Professional Development Program (NJSTW-PDP) is also new this year. Any school that applies for designation is eligible to participate. Focused on continuous improvement, members of the NJSTW team will meet with the school's administrative team and teachers and engage in a learning network to share promising practices in middle-level education.

The NJSTW program is supported by the New Jersey Department of Education; the New Jersey Consortium for Middle Schools which includes Kean, Rider, Rowan and William Paterson Universities; the New Jersey Education Association; the New Jersey Middle School Association; the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association/Foundation for Educational Administration; and the New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. New Jersey is one of 18 states participating in this national program to drive middle-level improvement. Technical assistance sessions will be held in May for the 2009-2010 program. To register, go to <http://education.state.nj.us/events/>. For more information on NJSTW, go to <http://www.nj.gov/education/dsis/stw/>

Middle Level Spotlight: James Barnes

The Pathway to Leadership

Have you ever considered becoming a middle grades principal? Aspiring middle school principals often embark on their first administrative opportunity possessing little or no teaching experience with middle grades students. This unfamiliar territory is filled with different educational philosophies and teaching strategies and a culture quite different from elementary and high schools. The middle-level leadership skill set is specialized to the needs of early adolescent learners; yet higher education preparation for middle-level work rarely seems to adequately address middle-level challenges. James Barnes, president of the New Jersey Middle School Association (NJMSA), found himself in this exact position when in 1997 he became an administrator at Chestnut Ridge Middle School in Washington Township, Gloucester County.

After earning a B.A. at Rider University, Jim began his journey as a high school math teacher, eventually becoming a high school assistant principal. The move to middle-level occurred shortly thereafter, forcing him to quickly acquaint himself with middle-level philosophies. "I recall immediately reaching for National Middle School Association (NMSA) resources and reading *Turning Points 2000* and *This We Believe* in order to develop a deeper understanding of middle school structures and practices." Jim has read and recommends time-honored classics such as *Meet Me in the Middle* by Rick Wormeli and *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* by Dave Brown and Trudy Knowles. At the NMSA Annual Conference, Jim acquired resources and information and networked with colleagues around the nation. He also credits the teachers at Chestnut Ridge with being among his most valued assets. "Relying on the knowledge and expertise of my teachers as middle-level educators was critical to my new role as a middle-level leader."

Jim's philosophy, "Always put the kids first," can be applied to every situation an educational leader might encounter. He applies this philosophy to staffing, discipline, and programming. "Your decisions must always be based on what is in the best interest of your early adolescent learners." Jim also values teamwork and a collaborative approach. "Involving all stakeholders inclusive of the academic team, exploratory team, and support staff helps to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our staff and students on a consistent basis."

As president of NJMSA, Jim's lessons in middle-level leadership now extend outside of Chestnut Ridge School. He promotes the voice of middle-level education through interaction with higher education, as well as the NJDOE. Jim and other members of the NJMSA Board of Directors provide a voice for middle-level education as part of the state's secondary redesign initiative. To showcase student voice, NJMSA sponsored a Month of the Young Adolescent essay contest. Learners from throughout New Jersey submitted over 1000 essays addressing the writing prompt, "If a Middle-Level Student Were the Next President of the United States..." The NJMSA, New Jersey Consortium for Middle

Schools (NJCMS), and the NJDOE hosted two administrators' breakfasts featuring Dr. Timothy Peters, Director of State Assessments, speaking about the impact of the NJASK on middle-level learners. Keeping middle-level education in the spotlight is one of Jim's priorities.

Jim's success as a middle-level leader can best be attributed to his commitment to lifelong learning, and in doing so, he serves a role model for the faculty. Jim is working with a faculty committee to research advisory programming. The school's professional learning community is gathering sample advisory handbooks from colleagues in New Jersey and reading *Taking the Lead in Implementing and Improving Advisory* by Bob Spears. According to Jim, "Middle schools must provide safety nets for early adolescents whether in the academic or social realm. Advisory is another middle level structure to help us ensure that not one of our students falls through the cracks." Like he has done before, he cites NMSA and networking with colleagues as a continued source of inspiration.

Jim and the NJMSA are dedicated to improving middle-level education for all New Jersey students. Are you involved? If not, go to <http://www.njmsa.com/> to find out more!

Thanks to Jim Barnes for this article.

Tips for Teaming: Keeping Your Teams on Target!

Are your teams solution-oriented or problem-focused? Do they spend more time talking about why they can't do something rather than looking for ways to get things done? Consider these tips to improve your school's teaming.

- **Be pro-active.** Focus time and energy on things that can be controlled (what Stephen Covey calls the Circle of Influence).
- **Synergize.** Take responsibility as a team. Everyone must adjust, adapt, try out new things, compare, evaluate, and explore possibilities. Know your teammates well.
- **Plan with the end in mind.** Write a vision or mission statement and craft objectives based on student needs, not adult needs.
- **Build bridges.** Make stronger connections across all content areas. There are no "benchwarmers" on the team or in the school—everyone contributes!
- **First things first.** Learn to prioritize. Dealing with the easiest issues first leaves little time to really consider more difficult areas. Stick to the plan. Make sure there is sufficient time to analyze data, talk about the issues, and come up with solutions.
- **Analyze, evaluate, and reinvigorate.** Talk about the why and how not just the what. Share success stories and celebrate small victories. Think win/win!
- **Listen and then listen again.** Value the ideas of all team members and consider them thoughtfully, respectfully, and carefully.
- **It's all about relationships.** Build trust. Genuinely care about each other. This is the glue that helps the team function at the highest level. Covey says you need to "sharpen the saw." In simple terms, teams need to constantly renew their commitment to the work and the students they serve. They also need to renew and sustain the team!

**School Spotlight:
Mountain View Middle School
A 2007-2008 New Jersey School to
Watch**



Mountain View Middle School is located in Mendham Borough in Morris County. Pat Lambert serves as principal of Mountain View and is a driving force for excellence in the school. The school is a small, close-knit learning community that celebrates the potential of each of its 300 adolescent learners. Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson argue in *Differentiation in Practice* (ASCD, 2003) “Encouragement is a testament to the belief that each of us can become more than we could have envisioned alone.” Mountain View’s teachers are “encouraged” by the curiosity of their students and strive to create lessons that engage students in the construction of knowledge. Teachers return the encouragement by providing the individualized attention in differentiated content, methods, and assessment that complement student learning styles and readiness. The collective goal is to reach beyond the personal comfort zone and grow as learners and human beings.

As evidence of its commitment to a rigorous academic program for all students, the school implements the Teachers College Writing Workshop which provides opportunities for process writing within class and at home, helping students become skilled writers across a variety of genres. The school also introduced the Teachers College Reading Workshop. The middle-level math program provides pre-algebra for all 6th grade students thereby permitting students to complete algebra in grade 7 or take an additional year in grade 8 to master the principles. Students who advance quickly are offered geometry in grade 8.

The school structure includes four interdisciplinary teams, each serving one grade level. Daily common planning time is afforded to teachers to facilitate the integrated learning program, foster greater communication with the home, and establish individualized learning plans for students. Unique to Mountain View, the schedule includes a period at the end of the day known as “Triple E” -- Electives, Enrichment, and Extended Learning. Students select from more than seventy elective opportunities to explore and develop interests not traditionally addressed in the curriculum.

To learn more, please go to <http://www.nj.gov/education/dsis/stw/0708/27-3090-060.htm> or <http://mendhamboro.schoolwires.com/mountainview/site/default.asp>.



Getting Parents and Families Involved: Challenges and Strategies

By the time a child reaches middle school, he/she is probably seeking more independence, renegotiating some of the rules, and looking for ways to disengage from parental authority. In “Fires in the Middle School Bathroom,” authors Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers share these comments about parents from middle-level students:

I think that parents want to be involved. It's just that at this age, we just don't want parents to be in our business.

Parents need to know when to back off, when the kid needs space. But they need to know if [there's] something really important to get involved in.

I want him to be there [at parent conferences] so that he knows what's going on with me and homework and school. And I don't want him to be there, because he might find out some stuff that might be bad, and then he might get mad at me.

What can your school do to get parents more engaged with their child's education? Noted expert Joyce Epstein's “Framework of Six Steps of Involvement,” found at <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm>, helps educators develop more comprehensive school, family, and community partnerships.

Type 1: Parenting focuses on helping families establish home environments that support children as students. Families may be overwhelmed with economic and time demands and as a result, the parents of young adolescents tend to interact less with teachers and schools. To open the communication door, schools can provide parent education programs at various times of the day or even online. Offering free DVDs or videos on young adolescent development can help parents determine if their child's behavior is developmentally appropriate. When parents become more focused and more confident in the parental role, their children can develop respect, trust, and positive attitudes about school and its importance.

Type 2: Communicating focuses on how the school communicates with the family about programs and student progress. During student-led conferences, families, teachers, and students can engage in productive dialogue about progress, goals, and accomplishments.

When schools regularly schedule communications, such as newsletters, Web-based messages, student portfolios, or phone calls, parents expect and depend on the communication to stay informed and engaged. Just calling a parent to share a success story can make all the difference.

Type 3: Volunteering focuses on how parents and family members can become actively involved in working at the school or at a school-sponsored activity. This role goes beyond the traditional “homeroom mom” role and extends beyond fund-raising. Simply put, schools have an obligation to identify the talents of families and to use those talents in ways that benefit all students. Family members can serve as mentors, speakers, translators, career guides, resources for special projects, and tutors. Some parents may be hesitant to volunteer for their own child’s class or grade but might be willing to assist in another classroom or venue. Families that volunteer often develop increased comfort and confidence in the work of the school and share those feelings with their children.

Type 4: Learning at Home focuses on how families support homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions. Once students enter middle school, families may feel inadequate dealing with the more rigorous demands of projects and homework. The school can offer programs such as family math or science night, and keep families informed of regularly scheduled homework assignments through calendars, websites, and notes home. Schools can provide summer learning packets and reading lists and suggest family outings that will support background knowledge and extend classroom learning to keep students engaged and learning throughout the year.

Type 5: Decision-making focuses on including parents and families in school decisions and encouraging them to become leaders and partners in the school community. Beyond the traditional parent-teacher organization, parental voice is critical to a feeling of ownership of the school. Encourage families to share experiences, connect with other families, and become aware of local, state, and federal policies that impact their child’s education. Teachers can begin to view families as advisors and partners in planning and shaping the school’s culture and programs.

Type 6: Collaborating with the Community focuses on coordinating resources and services for students and their families and connecting the school with the larger community. Making these connections through service learning, creative partnerships with civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and businesses enriches the lives of students and their families and helps them connect “school” to the real-world.

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school...If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children’s education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. From: Joyce Epstein, *Children We Share*
Access at: http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/6799_epstein_ch_1.pdf



Academic Excellence: Rigorous Standards for All Students

Overview of the 2009 Standards Revision Project

The 2009 standards reflect current research, exemplary practices, national and state standards and standards from other countries. They were drafted by task forces consisting of educators and experts recognized for their content area expertise and demonstration of excellence as practitioners in their respective fields. In each content area, standards and cumulative progress indicators align with the knowledge and skills needed for post-secondary education and the workplace. Standards and Cumulative Progress Indicators in all content areas do the following:

- Reflect prioritized knowledge and skills identified in the 2008 **Standards Clarification Project** using Big Ideas, Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions (<http://www.nj.gov/education/aps/njscp>);
- Integrate **21st Century Knowledge and Skills** (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>) by incorporating:
 - Technology integration
 - Interdisciplinary connections
 - Global perspectives
- Reflect **21st Century Themes**: Global Awareness; Financial, Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial Literacy; Civic Literacy; and Health Literacy;

The revised standards emphasize the development of skills needed in contemporary real-world situations and provide the foundation for the development of curriculum that promotes the use of innovative learning strategies by integrating supportive technologies, inquiry- and problem-based approaches and higher order thinking skills. **Classroom Application Documents (CADs)** are linked to various cumulative progress indicators and provide guidance and resources for teachers including sample assessment tasks and natural links to integrated content, global perspectives, and technology. A Web site will be launched that features a final version of the document with search capability to enable users to access the standards and cumulative progress indicators by multiple means (e.g., grade level, content area, strand, word search, essential questions, enduring understandings). Users will be able to view, print or download the standards and accompanying resources on demand. For more information on the Standards Revision Project and how you can provide feedback, please go to: <http://www.nj.gov/education/aps/cccs/2009/>.



Developmental Responsiveness: Stuck in the Middle... Again

The first day of kindergarten is a celebration for parent and child and the first day of elementary school is a magical experience for the entire community. It becomes a “picture perfect” moment, one that families look back on wistfully and fondly. In sharp contrast, the transition to the middle grades is often a shock and trauma for everyone. Why? What is so different?

Most five-year-olds consider their parents the center of the universe. Everything between parent and child is shared. By the time a child has reached age twelve, the young adolescent period, their universe centers on friends -- what friends do, wear, think, and say. Young adolescents think that parents lack knowledge and experience. “Tweens” view their parents and adults in general as embarrassing. Kisses and hugs, once freely given at the front door of kindergarten class, are now long gone. Young teenagers run from their parent’s car with terror in their eyes as if their parents are strangers chasing them down!

So what happened? The school and the parents have not changed. Rather, this behavior change is a natural transition towards independence. In fact, it is a very positive developmental sign when students try out their personalities. As a teacher and principal, I have seen some of these new personalities -- they can be child-like, adult-like and monster-like all in a few minutes! The good news is that the child will return to “normal” when moving out of adolescence. In the meantime, what can the school do to ease this transition?

First, schools need to explain to parents what this “developmental phase” will look like. Provide reassurance to parents and families that this is a natural transition. Use PTA meetings to have seasoned parents share their experiences. This will go a long way towards easing everyone’s anxiety.

Use summer orientations to preview the school’s core subjects -- this will help everyone feel more at home. When students have an opportunity to meet their teachers in advance, they are better able to visualize the upcoming school year and the added responsibilities of middle grades. Older students serving as mentors and guides can help new students make the transition from elementary to middle grades, just as later on, older students will help the transition to high school.

As a middle-level principal, I have learned that one way to determine the ages of students in a school is by watching how they walk in the hallways. Sixth grade students do not walk, they run. They may not know why they are running, they just feel they should! Seventh graders are running to and from a group of girls huddled and giggling, while the boys are trying to talk about sports. Their attention span lasts until lunch when the latest updates are given. Eighth graders stroll down the hallway because they have grown to be “totally cool” in their own skins. There is no need to rush anywhere for anyone.

Watching this growth and transition after a three-year period is quite rewarding. Every transition comes with new and exciting times. As adults, let us not predispose the experience by the statement, “They will not tolerate this next year.” Young adolescents need to learn that every school has a unique set of skills to teach along the way. From elementary to middle, middle to high school, and high school to college - it is a wild and crazy ride! Just enjoy the fabulous experience of being there, up close and personal, for these life-changing experiences.

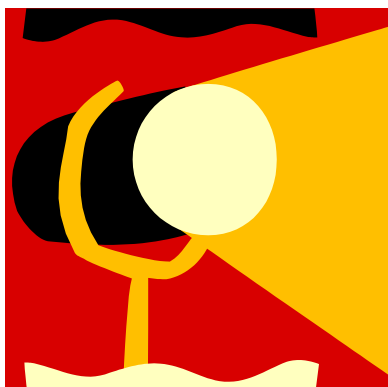
Thanks to Dr. Pamela Vaughan, Principal, Ocean City Intermediate School, a 2007-2008 NJSTW, for this article.



**Celebrating
Accomplishments:
Maurice River Style!**

Maurice River Elementary School, a 2007-2008 New Jersey School to Watch, rolls out the red carpet for its students. The annual Academic Awards Program, fashioned after the Hollywood Oscar ceremony, recognizes the academic achievement of students and even includes a star-studded “Walk of Fame.” Students dress for success and the room is decorated with gold stars and red carpet. The award displays the school’s mascot, an eagle, with the theme “Soaring to Success.”

The Red Carpet Awards ceremony concludes with tasty desserts provided by the Maurice River staff and a DJ Dance party in the gymnasium. The event is by invitation only—and it has already become a “hot” ticket and motivator for students in the school. Superintendent John Saporito told the students that “this year brings new challenges for you in order to continue improving your academic proficiency. You have proved that you are capable of making the progress which is required through your effort and hard work. Keep striving to improve each and every day....” Maurice River knows how to celebrate success!



Keeping Your School in the Spotlight: Tips from the Trenches

For too many adults, early adolescence is a developmental unknown. Middle school leaders need to take every opportunity to educate parents and community stakeholders. Once they understand the real needs of young adolescents, they can appreciate the unique structures that create a genuine developmentally responsive middle school. Such understanding fosters support and funding for middle school programs. Here are some tips on ways to keep your middle school in the spotlight!

- Host a series of workshops such as a Parents Institute of Early Adolescence. One resource for building parent workshops includes: *Coming of Age: The Education and Development of Early Adolescents* by Kenneth Brighton.
- Get the word out that your middle school is doing good things for students. Develop a few message points you want to share about your school. Put them on business cards for the staff, on your fax cover sheet, on your Web site, and in parent newsletters.
- Develop a brochure “50 Great Things about Our Middle School” and distribute it at registration, open house, and conferences. Give copies to your district office and the local realtors to pass on to those considering moving into your attendance area.
- Host a breakfast or lunch for local realtors – give them a tour of the school and make a positive, lasting impression!
- Keep your superintendent and board informed of effective middle-level practices. Pass on articles or Web sites you think would interest them. Invite district office personnel to attend a middle-level conference with you. Offer to share results of a successful program at a school board meeting – and bring along students to help with the report! Send board members copies of your school newsletter.
- Invite a student to join you at a civic club meeting. Encourage student performance groups to reach out to community organizations for meeting programs.
- Build a relationship with your local media and be proactive not reactive. Focus on the good stuff!
- Stay in contact with your state representatives. Invite them to visit your school to speak with classes or to talk with families about programs, services, and funding.

For more details go to: http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec.asp?CID=686&DID=49184



Social Equity: Valuing Diversity throughout the Year

We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same.

Anne Frank

When Anne Frank describes how “our lives are all different” she is referring to diversity. *N.J.A.C. 6A: 7-1.3 Managing for Equality and Equity in Education* states that diversity means unique differences among individuals, groups and cultures. The concept of diversity reflects the idea that all members of a community, whether middle schools, towns, nations, or the global community, differ from each other. These differences may be in race, creed, color, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, affectional or sexual orientation, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, learning style, linguistic ability, belief system, physical or cognitive ability, or even personal interest. Schools must recognize and value the differences within and among the school’s population and assure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. As teachers prepare students for social and academic success in a 21st century global economy, it is imperative that students are knowledgeable and have a deep understanding that individuals have differing experiences and perspectives and that there is value in learning about the experiences and perspectives of others.

In the Schools to Watch® criteria, the theme of diversity is implicitly referred to as part of Academic Excellence and Developmental Responsiveness and explicitly referenced in the criteria relating to Social Equity and Organization Structures and Processes. The criteria can lay the groundwork for important conversations about your school’s approach to diversity including such questions as:

- Across content areas, how does the curriculum facilitate a deep understanding of concepts by consciously and consistently incorporating different perspectives into curriculum-related activities?

- How does the school incorporate the theme of diversity into interdisciplinary projects that address real-world problems? How often do these projects occur and within which disciplines?
- Throughout the year, what types of projects do students complete to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world?
- Are there disparities in the school's subgroup scores on standardized tests? If so, what specific actions are being used to address these disparities?
- How are students recognized for their diverse academic abilities and learning styles? What kinds of differentiated instructional strategies and supports are in place?
- When and how often do students have opportunities to voice differing opinions, pose questions, reflect on varying experiences, and participate in various decision-making activities?
- When looking at the diverse population of your own school, do all populations have "true" opportunities to succeed at high levels? For example, do all students receive world language instruction? Are classes heterogeneously grouped? Do all students have the opportunity to participate in club or enrichment activities? What can the school do to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed at high levels?
- Does the school make available in all classrooms, as well as in the media center, a wide range of multicultural texts and materials so that all students have ongoing opportunities to learn about diverse cultures represented in the school, community, nation, and world?
- What can the school do to recruit a more diverse faculty and staff?
- When discipline and suspension data is disaggregated, are there disparities? For example, are boys suspended more than girls or is one race suspended disproportionately more than another? What steps need to be taken to lower both the suspension rate and disparities?

Remember: Consideration of diverse populations and perspectives enhances the education of all students and prepares learners to think creatively and at high levels so they can be better prepared to live in the global community.

Thanks to Dr. Kelly McNeal, William Paterson University, for this article.

In the article **Kids Really are Different These Days**, found in the February 2009 edition of *Phi Delta Kappan*, author Diana Coyl suggests that the course you took in human development might just be out of date. Coyl examines the developmental characteristics of upper elementary students looking at physical development, the impact of media and technology, self-understanding, and emotional competence. Considering the lessening impact of adults on adolescent thinking and behavior, Coyl suggests that early adolescents are prime candidates for prevention and intervention efforts designed to deter poor academic performance and dropping out and to further improve their physical, mental, and social outcomes. To access this article and others on middle-level issues go to <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/khome/khpartic.htm>.



Navigating the Sea of Change at the Middle Level

Middle-level leaders are faced with a myriad of pressures from various sources. The *No Child Left Behind* federal mandate has increased the accountability for schools, with middle schools bearing the brunt of the accountability measures. At the same time, New Jersey is redesigning secondary schools, which, in turn, creates a sea of change at the middle level. As captains of the ship, middle-level leaders must now, more than ever, navigate through these new mandates while simultaneously keeping the middle school philosophy at the heart of the school. Guiding middle-level leaders and policy makers during this tumultuous time is the National Middle School Association's document, [*Success in the Middle: A Policymaker's Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education*](#).

Middle-level leaders must set their compass at curricula that is challenging, engaging, and standards-based for all of learners. Curriculum decisions must be driven through data analysis so that assessment is used as a tool for learning. Faculty involvement in this analysis is crucial so that instructional decisions support the vision, goals, and subsequent outcomes necessary for all students. Interim or benchmark assessments should be integrated across content areas and throughout the school year so that state testing is not the only means of assessing student achievement.

Staffing middle schools with highly-qualified subject matter specialists is not nearly enough. Educators must also be developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents. Middle-level leaders are advised to seek candidates who possess experience working with young adolescents in a classroom setting or have related experiences outside the school environment. Establish a partnership with a local college or university to create professional learning communities consisting of prospective teachers and experienced middle-level classroom teachers. Capitalize on these relationships to advocate for middle-level focused requirements in teacher preparation programs. In turn, employ your middle-level skills as a staff developer so that new teacher orientation and mentoring activities reflect best practices in middle-level education.

Middle-level leaders must resist demands to eliminate structures inherent to successful middle-level programming. Teaming and common planning time allow educators to plan engaging interdisciplinary units and to use the collective wisdom of the team to meet the needs of the whole child. Dividing teams into even smaller units, known as advisories,

creates stronger connections between teachers and students so that not one middle-level learner falls through the cracks. Creative scheduling must be explored so that these structures are maintained alongside the demands of a rigorous academic program.

As instructional leaders, middle-level administrators have an obligation to provide their staffs with focused professional development experiences relative to the learning needs of young adolescents. The NMSA [Professional Development Kit](#) series is one such resource. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (<http://www.mgforum.org/>) sponsors the Schools to Watch program (<http://www.schoolstowatch.org/>). This research-based program enables middle-level leaders to assess the degree of implementation of middle school philosophy coupled with middle school performance. In addition, resources exemplifying best middle-level practices are evident at the annual conference of the [New Jersey Middle School Association](#).

As middle-level administrators begin to navigate through this new educational journey, it is extremely important to keep the middle school philosophy at the forefront. The importance of raising academic standards goes without saying; however, it can never be understated that middle-level educators must always have one foot pointed toward the true belief of middle-level education. As they steer their vessels forward, middle-level leaders must collaborate with one another to maintain a focus through the sea of change. It is hard work, but leaders can create a school culture that challenges students academically, while fostering relationships to educate the whole child.

Thanks to Jim Barnes for this article.

Success and failure are intertwined. Babe Ruth led the league in strikeouts the same year he hit 60 homeruns.

Anonymous

Strategies to Motivate and Engage Middle-Level Learners

- √ ***Create a task-oriented classroom.***
- √ ***Increase student effort.***
- √ ***Help students overcome a fear of failure.***
- √ ***Relate lessons to students' lives.***
- √ ***Make the learning authentic.***
- √ ***Give students choices.***

Adapted from *Stuck in the Middle: Strategies to Engage Middle-Level Learners*. Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, May 2008. Newsletter available at:
http://www.centerforsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=364&Itemid=99.



Hot Topics, Resources, Professional Development, and Best Practices

Do you have a resource for middle grades students that you would like to share with others? A favorite Web site or project? Tell us about it! E-mail your ideas and suggestions to: NJSTWapps@doe.state.nj.us. Be sure to include your name, school and the grade/content area you teach, and your e-mail address. We may feature your great ideas, tips, and resources in our next newsletter!

Resources, Web sites, and Other Stuff!

MiddleWeb provides a wealth of resources for schools, districts, educators, parents, and public school advocates working to raise achievement for all students in the middle grades. It was established in 1996 with grant support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement, which focused on middle school improvement. The site includes hundreds of articles and links about curriculum, teaching strategies, teacher professional development, parent involvement, classroom assessment, and much more. <http://www.middleweb.com/>

KnowHow2Go: This Web site helps middle level students begin to think and plan for college. It includes a college quiz and student newsletter. <http://www.knowhow2go.org/middle.php>

National Association of Secondary School Principals: March 2009 has been proclaimed as Middle-Level Education Month by NASSP and this year's theme is **Celebrating Our Past, Looking to the Future**. The NASSP Web site is filled with information on timely topics such as transitions, building relationships, improving instruction, and teaming. For more information, go to: http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec_inside.asp?CID=59&DID=59

New Jersey Resources for Middle Grades: This resource was developed and is maintained by a team of New Jersey educators representing the NJMSA, NJASCD, NJCMS, NJDOE, and NJPSA. <http://stwresources.pbwiki.com/>

New Jersey High School Redesign: Get the latest information on the state's initiative to improve opportunities for all students in grades 6-12. <http://www.state.nj.us/education/ser/>

Improving High School Graduation Rates: For information on New Jersey's campaign to improve outcomes for all students, go to www.njgraduation.org.

Children at Risk: Middle School: An article in the *American School Board Journal* (Subscription required).
<http://www.asbj.com/MainMenuCategory/Archive/2009/January/Children-At-Risk-Middle-School.aspx>

Diversity and the Arts-Smithsonian Global Sound: If you're interested in world music, check out Smithsonian Global Sound which contains 40,000 tracks from the Smithsonian Folkways archives. Albums and individual songs are available for purchase and download. For Black History Month, Global Sound offers free videos, music, and spoken-word recordings. Lesson plans and student activities are included.
http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/teaching_activities.aspx#Heritage

Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement: The purpose of the center is to assist schools and school districts contemplating or engaged in school reform and improvement. The center's mission is to help schools organize, plan, implement, and sustain improvement. Free resources include a [searchable online database](#) with nearly 5000 abstracts of school improvement studies, research reports, and articles; [Webcast discussions](#) with national experts and local practitioners on timely education topics; [published materials](#) (newsletters, issue briefs, and research briefs) on topics pertinent to school improvement; and an "[Ask the Expert](#)" service that allows educators to get fast answers to questions about school improvement. www.centerforsri.org.

Cyberbullying: On April 22 from 3:00-4:30 PM EST, the *Stop Bullying Now!* team will host a free Webcast called *Cyberbullying: Tools and Tips for Prevention and Intervention*. Presenters include Susan Limber, Ph.D., professor and bullying prevention researcher, Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University; Patti Agatston, Ph.D., Prevention/Intervention Center, Cobb County School District and co-author of *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*; and Mike Tully, JD, attorney and expert on legal and policy issues in cyberbullying. To register go to:
<http://www.mchcom.com/liveWebcastDetail.asp?leid=371>

Teaming: Practical tips and ideas, research and more from the National Middle School Association: <http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/OnTarget/Teaming/tabid/304/Default.aspx>

School Connectedness: The belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning, as well as about them as individuals, is an important protective factor. Research has shown that young people who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in many risky behaviors. For more information on adolescent health issues go to:
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/AdolescentHealth/connectedness.htm>

Meeting the Needs of All Learners: The National Middle School Association (NMSA) and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) released a joint position statement on excellence and equity. Access at: <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=400>.

EnviroHealth Connections is a gateway to multimedia resources for middle and high school students and teachers. These innovative materials help students explore the significant relationship between the environment and human health. This project brings imagination into the classroom through interactive investigations, expert presentations, comprehensive lesson plans and more. The standards-based resources were developed through a partnership between Maryland Public Television and the Center in Urban Environmental Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. <http://www.thinkport.org/CLASSROOM/CONNECTIONS/general/about.tp>.

C-spanclassroom.org is a Web site for social studies teachers with downloadable and searchable video clips, a fully searchable database of C-SPAN video clips, and discussion questions linked to national standards. Materials are copyright-cleared for classroom use and include primary source materials. <http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/>

Schools to Watch Middle-Level Institute: The NJ Consortium for Middle Schools and the Center for Innovative Education at Kean University sponsors The Middle-Level Institute, featuring Dr. George White, director of the Middle-Level Partnership at Lehigh University, and Dr. Nancy Doda, president of Teacher To Teacher on July 20-23, 2009. Register at <http://cie.kean.edu/registration.html> or call (908) 737-3864.

Many thanks to our partners and contributors! We appreciate your commitment to middle-level learners!

New Jersey Consortium for Middle Schools:

http://131.125.2.61/~njcms/Flash_Page.html

New Jersey Middle School Association: www.njmsa.org

New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development:
www.njascd.org

New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association: www.njpsa.org

National Forum: <http://www.mgforum.org/>



at the **CORE** of middle level
EDUCATION

